

VZCZCXRO2485
PP RUEHAG RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHKUK RUEHROV
DE RUEHLB #2009/01 3651619
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 311619Z DEC 07
FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0612
INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE
RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE
RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO 2068
RHMFISS/CDR USCENCOM MACDILL AFB FL
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 002009

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/HARDING

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/31/2017

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [SY](#) [IS](#) [LE](#)

SUBJECT: LEBANON: NEW YEAR'S EVE "YEAR IN REVIEW" WITH PM
SINIORA

REF: BEIRUT 2008

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) Prime Minister Siniora conducted an informal "Year in Review" session with the Ambassador during a meeting on December 31, repeating some previously reported points about the threat to Lebanon's sovereignty in recent months. The Prime Minister also expressed surprising optimism about the January 6 Arab League Foreign Ministers meeting in Cairo being organized by the Saudi and Egyptian governments to discuss the current Lebanese political crisis, saying he had been given assurances that the outcome would indeed benefit Lebanon. Looking forward, he recommended that Lebanon's allies closely study the requests for financial assistance (reftel), support the statements that emerge from the January 6th meeting in Cairo, re-engage European interlocutors, particularly parliamentarians, and unite behind a strong message condemning Syria's interference in Lebanese internal affairs. And just to end the year on an odd note typical for Lebanese politics, he confirmed that the specter of a Jean Obeid presidency was faintly visible in the background should what Siniora believes are Syrian efforts to derail the candidacy of Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) Commander Michel Sleiman succeed. End Summary.

The Year in Review

2. (C) The Prime Minister was in a relaxed mood during this meeting, which also included Siniora's Advisors Mohamad Chatah and Rola Nouredine, DCM Bill Grant and Special Assistant. Siniora was pleased about the recent marriage of his son. The Siniora family broke with the Lebanese tradition of an elaborate formal wedding and instead chose to go with an intimate family affairs for a "mere" 250 people (vice the 2,500 people, say, invited to the 2006 wedding of the son of the aforementioned Jean Obeid). On a pessimistic note, he observed that his own wedding 31 years before had been marked by a "sky full of bombs," which prevented his parents from traveling from Sidon to Beirut for the ceremony. He mourned the fact that, a generation later, security concerns still impacted Siniora family weddings.

3. (C) The Ambassador began the meeting by saying that, in fact, Lebanon was in better shape than it had been a few short months ago. A consensus candidate has been chosen, the Patriarch was fully engaged and publicly issuing helpful

messages about the need for a rapid election, the LAF is stable even in the face of the political turmoil, and the U.S. focus has been strong and public, as evidenced by the recent visits of NEA Assistant Secretary Welch and Deputy Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs Elliot Abrams. Moreover, France seems to have learned its lesson about Syrian intentions.

14. (C) Siniora admitted that the above was all true, but that Lebanon was still being "held hostage" by outside forces who are intent on dismantling Lebanon's institutions and sovereignty. As evidence, he referred to the fact that the Lebanese parliament was "hijacked" 14 months ago, the presidency is empty, LAF senior leadership has been directly targeted in an attack, and that the Lebanese constitution was being openly questioned rather than obeyed. He said, "I have to be frank. This is a war and Lebanon has become the battleground in a larger conflict between Europe and the U.S. and some elements in the Middle East. We are caught in the middle. I want you to remember - I've never asked you for anything unreasonable, like sending in a naval fleet. I just want all international partners to put the appropriate pressure on Syria to halt their interference. And I am not looking to replace a Syrian presence with a French presence, an American one, or any other. This has never been our goal."

Cairo: Sarkozy (aka "The Prodigal Son") Returns

15. (C) Turning his attention to other international players, Siniora acknowledged the positive dialogue recently held in Cairo between French President Sarkozy and Egyptian President Mubarak. Commenting on the French, Siniora called Sarkozy

BEIRUT 00002009 002 OF 003

his "prodigal son." Sarkozy had caused a great deal of mischief by negotiating with Syria and offering them deals before even consulting with the Lebanese. According to Siniora, the prodigal son has now seen the error of his ways and is trying to return to the fold.

16. (C) Siniora, who had spoken with Mubarak for a debrief on December 30, said that the French and Egyptians were in agreement that the current crisis in Lebanon could be directly blamed on Syria. Siniora expressed some concern about public statements that came from the meeting. According to Siniora, Mubarak may have indicated in his remarks that Syria should be called on to "interfere in Lebanon in a positive manner" to resolve the presidential crisis. This message made both Siniora and Chattah very nervous, who said this should have been stated privately. Syria should never be given any leeway to interfere in Lebanon - period.

17. (C) Despite all the disappointments of past Arab League diplomacy, Siniora has high hopes for the January 6th Arab League Foreign Ministers meeting in Cairo, which he hopes will unify Arab public opinion against Syria. He is asking the Arab participants to support the immediate and unconditional election of Michel Sleiman, to demand that Syria cease their policy of interference, and to support the sitting GOL until an election can take place. Asked who would represent Lebanon at this meeting, Siniora replied that he will give Foreign Minister Fawzi Salloukh, who resigned with other opposition ministers in November 2006, an invitation, wait for him to refuse as usual, and then send Acting FM Tariq Mitri to represent the GOL.

18. (C) Chattah did not share Siniora's optimism. He would rather see a strong, clear bilateral document from the Saudis and Egyptians alone than an Arab League effort that is watered down to "satisfy the concerns of countries like Oman and Yemen."

After Cairo: Focus on Europe

¶9. (C) In Siniora's opinion, it may be time for another UN Security Council resolution if Arab public opinion unites against Syria in Cairo. Then, he said, it is time to start working on the Europeans again. He was pleased to report that German Foreign Minister Steinmeier had taken his advice and postponed a visit invitation to Syrian Foreign Minister Mu'allim. Siniora wants Lebanese MP's to begin engaging directly with their European counterparts to highlight the fact the Speaker Berri refuses to let the Lebanese Parliament fulfill its constitutional duties. Siniora also mentioned that he may have to take one week in the near future to personally visit his European counterparts in their home capitals. (Note: In a private pull-aside with the Ambassador at the end of the meeting, Siniora mentioned likely being out of Beirut during the week of January 8. End note.)

The President's Upcoming Travels

¶10. (C) When asked what message he would wish the President to convey during his upcoming trip to the region, Siniora reiterated the importance of a united Arab diplomatic and public position on the Lebanon crisis. He also said that the French should support what the Arabs decide upon. Finally, he said that he is told time and time again that stability in Lebanon and the region is tied closely to progress on the Middle East Peace Process.

Staying with Sleiman - No More Compromises

¶11. (C) Looking forward, Siniora said that March 14 had gone as far as they could with compromises and now the time has come to stand firm. March 14 has abandoned the idea of using their strength in parliament to elect a president using the "50 1" simple majority voting option, which could be viewed by many as a divisive move. Siniora also said that the nomination of General Sleiman represented a major concession by March 14. Though Sleiman himself is a respected figure, Siniora had reservations about electing a military man to this high public office and amending the constitution to do so. Now Siniora fully supports the Sleiman candidacy.

BEIRUT 00002009 003 OF 003

¶12. (C) Sleiman was once favored by the March 8th opposition, but all that came to an end when he became March 14th's official candidate. The PM said the current stalemate is intended to exhaust Sleiman, the recent assassination of General al-Haj was meant to intimidate Sleiman, and now -- with rumors that the LAF would be called in to diffuse Hizballah protesters in the streets, if events take a violent turn -- the unity of Sleiman's beloved LAF could be placed in jeopardy, as well. Prime Minister Siniora said he had recently met with the General to encourage him to stand firm and remain "cool and above the political fray," which can quickly turn nasty in Lebanon.

¶13. (C) In Siniora's opinion, the March 8 opposition coalition was "becoming tense." He had heard that Syria was directly pressuring Speaker Berri to play a "destructive" role. Why? Perhaps some Syrian nationalists may feel that Hizballah is not doing enough to cause internal conflict.

The Ghost of Candidates Past (and Future?): Jean Obeid

¶14. (C) The Ambassador mentioned that, on December 30, Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister Elias Murr raised -- with suitable alarm -- the question of a Jean Obeid presidency should the Sleiman presidency be derailed by the methods outlined above. Murr said that he believes Obeid (who was always Nabih Berri's preference) is now the real Syrian

candidate. The Prime Minister confirmed this rumor and said he had heard it from Obeid himself, who declared that the Sleiman candidacy "was over." In a side-bar conversation discouraging to all, meeting participants debated the merits of Michel Edde vs. Jean Obeid as a back-up candidate. Siniora said that "Edde is a very good liar, but one can find a way to get through to Obeid in the end. Of the two, Obeid is the least worst option." Asked why Sleiman, once thought to be Syria's candidate, is now apparently being blocked by Damascus, Siniora explained that it is because Sleiman is "entering through the March 14 gate" rather than via Damascus. By contrast, Obeid would come to the presidency via Damascus.

FELTMAN